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Are Selfless Assertions Hedged?

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Abstract I argue against Milić's (2017) proposal of analyzing "selfless assertions" (Lackey 2007) as proper, i.e., as assertions which satisfy the norm of assertion. In his view, selfless assertions are hedged assertions governed by the knowledge norm. In my critique, I show that Milić does not make a case that selfless assertions constitute such a special class of assertions. Moreover, he does not deliver a clear criterion for differentiating between flat-out assertions and hedged ones. What is more, his proposal leaves some cases of selfless assertions unexplained. The outcome is that we are still left without a satisfactory account of selfless assertions as proper assertions.

Keywords: Assertion, Selfless assertion, Norms of assertion, Knowledge norm, Hedging

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1. Introduction

One performs a selfless assertion (SA) when one states something that one does not believe, despite possessing well-supported evidence to the contrary of one's belief. SA scenarios, originally introduced by Lackey (1999), are used as arguments in various debates in epistemology and philosophy of language. In epistemology, they serve as an example that a hearer may acquire knowledge by testimony from someone who does not know the proposition they assert. In the philosophy of language, they are used to show that a speaker does not need to believe that p to make a proper assertion.

Focusing on the latter debate, the most common way of explicating assertability is in terms of compliance with a norm of assertion. According to this account, assertion is governed by a particular norm constitutive for this speech act. Most commonly, it is argued that assertion is governed by the knowledge rule (KR):¹

(KR) one should assert that p only if one knows that p .

Many researchers have proposed various norms of assertion.² According to this framework, a proper or correct assertion is a speech act which satisfies the norm of

¹ See e.g. Williamson (1996), DeRose (2002), Hawthorne (2004). I use the notions of norm and rule interchangeably.

² To give some examples: a justification norm (Douven 2006, Lackey 2007), the truth norm (Weiner 2005), a certainty norm (Stanley 2008), and more.

assertion. Since KR is the most popular candidate for the norm of assertion, in my paper I assume that KR is the norm in question. However, nothing hinges on this assumption. Consider lies: they are improper assertions since they are insincere, i.e., the speaker does not believe in what she says. Most of the available norms of assertion assume belief as a requirement for making a correct assertion. Because we can criticize lies for violating the norm of assertion, they are assertions. Guesses, on the other hand, are not assertions since they are not subject to the norm of assertion, but rather to an arguably weaker norm. Thus, by making a guess that p I cannot be criticized for violating the norm of assertion.

The standard view states that SAs are genuine assertions. However, there is a disagreement whether we should treat SAs as proper or improper assertions. More precisely, the first option, i.e., treating SAs as proper assertions, is to propose a norm of assertion which explains the propriety both ordinary assertions and SAs.³ The second option is to treat SAs as improper assertions. What is worth observing here is that SAs satisfy all conditions of being a lie according to most of the recent definitions of lying.⁴ The basic problem with these strategies is that researchers are categorizing SAs as proper or improper assertions without closely pondering what exactly is going on in those cases.

Here I want to focus on the first option in which we can find two ways of dealing with SAs. On the first approach, authors reformulate SA scenarios in order to make them comply with KR. For instance, Engel (2008) proposes that SAs are simulated assertions, Montminy (2013) argues that SAs are epistemically improper and so unwarranted, Turri (2014) proposes various options: that a selfless asserter believes in what she says, that SAs are impermissible and made on behalf of the community, and that they should not be asserted.⁵ I think that Milić (2017) did a good job of criticizing these proposals. On the second approach, by staying faithful to Lackey's original scenarios, authors propose a suitable interpretation of KR which tries to capture SAs. I criticize the most recent proposal, namely, Milić's (2017) treatment of SAs.

2. Characteristics of selfless assertions

I start by introducing one of Lackey's original examples of SAs.⁶

CREATIONIST TEACHER: Stella is a devoutly Christian fourth-grade teacher, and her religious beliefs are grounded in a deep faith that she has had since she was a very young child. Part of this faith includes a belief in the truth of creationism and, accordingly, a belief in the falsity of evolutionary theory. Despite this, Stella

³ Among others, the supportive reasons norm of assertion (McKinnon 2013, 2015), various versions of the safety account (Pelling 2013a, Pritchard 2014), the knowledge provision account (Pelling 2013b), robustly epistemic norm of assertion (Goldberg 2015), the function first account (Kelp 2018), or the knowledge account in general (Montminy 2013, Turri 2014, Milić 2017).

⁴ I can list here especially so-called non-deceptionist definitions, according to which, intention to deceive is not necessary to lie, see e.g. Sorensen (2007), Fallis (2009), Carson (2010), Stokke (2018); see e.g. Lackey (2013) for a defence of a definition of lying comprising a notion of deception.

⁵ Along the lines of these proposals, Turri (2015) reports experimental findings which are supposed to indicate that SAs are governed by KR. For a critique see Gaszczyk (2019).

⁶ Lackey gives more examples, but for my purposes Stella's case is sufficient. I am interested in SAs as such, so I do not treat Stella's case in any special way. Consider another example of SA (see 2007: 598-599): Sebastian is a doctor who due to personal trauma abandons his scientific beliefs regarding vaccines. Nevertheless, he says to his patients that "There is no connection between vaccines and autism" despite not believing that this is true.

fully recognizes that there is an overwhelming amount of scientific evidence against both of these beliefs. Indeed, she readily admits that she is not basing her own commitment to creationism on evidence at all but, rather, on the personal faith that she has in an all-powerful Creator. Because of this, Stella does not think that religion is something that she should impose on those around her, and this is especially true with respect to her fourth-grade students. Instead, she regards her duty as a teacher to include presenting material that is best supported by the available evidence, which clearly includes the truth of evolutionary theory. As a result, while presenting her biology lesson today, Stella asserts to her students, “Modern day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*,” though she herself neither believes nor knows this proposition (2007: 599).

The SA which Stella makes is:

(1) Modern day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*.

Lackey argues that there are three necessary conditions to perform an act of SA:

(NON-BELIEF) a subject, for purely non-epistemic reasons, does not believe (and hence does not know) that *p*;
(EVIDENCE) despite this lack of belief, the subject is aware that *p* is very well supported by all of the available evidence; and,
(ASSERTION) because of this, the subject asserts that *p* without believing and, hence, without knowing that *p*. (2007, 599)

I consider these conditions not as a definition of SAs, but rather as the common properties of SAs.

There are many intuitions regarding cases of SAs. In short, they are seen as both commendable and insincere. Lackey (2007: 599) argues that SAs are proper assertions. For her, SAs are subject to praise and are «not subject to criticism in any relevant sense». This implies that asserting something that one believes to be false can be proper. This conclusion is highly controversial. In the next section, I review Milić’s (2017) attempt at circumventing this problem.

3. Selfless assertions as hedged assertions

Milić (2017) proposes to treat SAs as hedged assertions.⁷ According to Milić (2017: 2287), by uttering (1) in a classroom, Stella commits herself to defending (2):

(2) According to the best available evidence, modern day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*.

What is asserted is only a hedged content, namely, (2).⁸ Further, by arguing that Stella asserts (2), we can say that she believes and knows the content of (2). As Milić argues,

⁷ In his paper, Milić presents also the second strategy, according to which, SAs are distinct illocutionary acts from assertions, namely, presentations. I focus only on the first one.

⁸ Some could complain that the formula «according to the best available evidence» does not amount to hedging. It is generally accepted that a hedged statement is one that contains a hedging expression or construction. Moreover, the formula proposed by Milić is very general and could be used with respect to every scientific statement. With this in mind, I follow Milić and assume that «according to the best available evidence» can be treated as a hedging construction. It is worth pointing out that the proposed hedging in (2) is incorrect for Stella since she does not recognize the theory of evolution as providing «the

«Stella's assertion is neither selfless nor unwarranted: Stella firstly believes the content of (2) and secondly knows it» (2017: 2287). This seems to be coherent with KR. Moreover, because (2) is something Stella could agree with, it does not violate her religious beliefs. According to this proposal, SAs are not selfless since, by making them, one expresses one's own belief. SAs, thus, are proper assertions. The difference between assertions and SAs is that the content of the latter is always hedged in some way.

Milić's proposal generates the following question: how can we determine whether a speaker performs a flat-out assertion or a hedged statement? He argues that «certain contextual parameters pertaining to the act of teaching [...] contribute to one conveying weaker content than we may think simply by looking at the sentences uttered» (2017: 2287). Such contextual parameters are in force when a teacher performs her duties. Furthermore, Milić proposes that in order to answer the question whether one makes a flat-out assertion or a hedged one, we should ask ourselves which content the speaker is committed to defending.⁹ An important disclaimer: in the quoted passage, Milić focuses on contextual parameters in the case of teachers, but SAs are performed in various contexts, institutional or not. Thus, his considerations in principle should apply to all instances of SAs.

My aim is to show that Milić's explanation of SAs is not satisfactory. I undermine his criterion for distinguishing when we assert a flat-out assertion from a hedged one. Further, I argue that the proposed hypothesis regarding hedging is unmotivated. I also show that his argument does not explain all instances of SAs. Finally, Milić leaves unexplained impropriety of SAs.

Let us start with an example which Milić can easily explain. When I ask a colleague "What is the weather outside?" and she responds that "It is raining" I do not wonder whether this is a flat-out assertion or a hedged statement. If KR is satisfied, then I acquire knowledge that it is raining. Moreover, by saying that it is raining, my colleague expresses certain mental state. In case of an assertion, it is usually a belief. If she would like to make a hedged assertion, she should use an appropriate hedging explicitly (or indicate it in a proper way), for instance, "In my opinion, *p*", "As far as I'm aware, *p*", or "According to the best available evidence, *p*". Only then would I know that she does not know that it is raining. It is rather natural to argue that in such a context my friend commits herself to defending the flat-out assertion and that no contextual parameters are in force. In such a case Milić could simply state that because we do not find any relevant contextual parameters, the speaker makes a flat-out assertion.

An insignificant alteration in the story could yield to different intuitions regarding the question whether my colleague's answer is hedged or not. Imagine that my friend is a meteorologist and her claims about the weather are always based on scientific data. When she says "It is raining", her friends know that she means something like "According to the best available evidence, it is raining". One could argue that even though she makes the flat-out assertion, she commits to the hedged one. But how can

best available evidence». Rather, she presents something like «the best evidence which is considered as scientific or relevant in the context of the classroom». One could argue that my complaint here is at odds with Lackey's original scenario. Lackey states that «Stella fully recognizes that there is an overwhelming amount of scientific evidence against both of these beliefs» (2007: 599), i.e., the truth of creationism and falsity of evolutionary theory. I do not think that my critique of Milić's hedging and proposed alteration go against Lackey's scenario. Lackey emphasizes that Stella recognizes scientific evidence against her unscientific beliefs. But Lackey does not say that Stella recognizes the scientific evidence as "the best available", as Milić proposes. Thus, I think that Milić's hedging misrepresents what Stella has in mind when performing her duties as a teacher: what she does is presenting the best scientific (according to school or state standards) evidence. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

⁹ See also MacFarlane (2011: 92).

we determine to which content she commits? Moreover, if she would make her claim in public, she could be heard by people who do not know that she was committing herself just to the hedged claim. Such a simple example blurs intuitions concerning the question of what contextual parameters and under which conditions could justify the claim that a speaker can say one thing and assert something else. Milić could argue here that if she commits herself to the hedged content, then this is what she asserts. However, such a conclusion is counterintuitive: everyone except her good friends would say that she simply asserted p . The general audience cannot know to what content the speaker is committing to in such cases. My point here is very general: it is not clear how to determine whether we are in a context where certain contextual parameters are in force. This is especially so when a context seems to be ‘normal’, just as in the described case. As a default option, the audience typically assumes that the speaker is committed to the content which is stated, and not to a weaker content. So in Milić’s proposal, the criterion for assessing when we perform flat-out assertions and hedged ones turns out to be underdetermined.

Moreover, such a proposal has an additional problem. Even if we were able to establish that a speaker said that p but asserted a hedged content, we could not know what kind of hedging it is. Proposing, as Milić does, that we should ask what a speaker commits herself to does not provide an answer to this question. Consider the above example: granting that one asserted a hedged content, we must still establish what kind of hedging she had in mind. In the case of Stella, Milić does not argue why it should be strong evidential hedging “According to the best available evidence, p ”, and not something weaker (like “In my opinion, p ”, “As far as I’m aware, p ”, etc.). Asserting a hedged proposition implicates that a speaker does not know that p . Thus, if a speaker does not want to mislead her audience, it should be clear what kind of content is she asserting. Moreover, a hedging could elicit such questions as “What do *you* think?” or “What makes you say that?” Such challenges indicate that speaker’s commitment is weaker than in case of a flat-out assertion. But these challenges can arise only when it is clear for the audience that the speaker makes a hedged assertion. If she wants to make a hedged assertion but does not express it explicitly or indicate it in some way, then her assertion is not performed properly. However, according to Milić’s proposal, such an assertion – at least in some contexts – should be proper since by saying p we can assert a hedged p . Thus, Milić’s proposal neither provides a clear criterion of deciding when a speaker makes a flat-out assertion or a hedged one nor gives any indication what kind of hedging we should choose.

What is more, even if this proposal were valid, it would not explain all instances of SAs. For simplicity, in my paper, I focus on Stella’s case, but Lackey proposes also a non-institutional case of SA, namely, “Racist Juror” (2007, 598). In this example, Martin, raised as racist, was chosen to serve on the jury in a case against a black man on trial concerning raping a white woman. Although Martin sees that there is no evidence against this man, he still thinks that the man did it. However, because he recognizes that his beliefs against this man are rooted in his racism, after leaving the courthouse, asked by his friend whether the guy did it, he says “No, the guy did not rape her”.

Milić’s proposal has the following problem with Martin’s case: even if we would agree that Martin’s statement to his friend is somehow hedged, it is problematic to say what kind of contextual parameters are in force in the context where Martin is not obliged to say whether the defendant is guilty or not. Furthermore, asking whether Martin is committed to defending his assertion or a hedged one does not work in favour of Milić: nothing stops Martin from asserting what he himself thinks about this case, so the most natural explanation of this case is that what he asserts is his own opinion. Thus, Martin

makes his assertion in an ordinary context, so it does not make sense to propose that he somehow hedges his claim. Thus, Milić's account does not capture all SAs.

As a consequence, Milić's proposal – even if only in some cases – weakens our standard understanding of *what is asserted*. In ordinary contexts, when we assert that *p*, we should know (or at least think we know) that *p* and we commit to the truth of *p*, rather than to a hedged proposition. If we were to follow Milić and allow for this sort of hedging to occur in ordinary contexts, then our commitment to what is asserted would often be to the hedged proposition. This is clearly not the case. Apart from few non-standard cases, our assertion that *p* is read by our audience as our commitment to the truth of *p*.

Finally, just as other proposals that analyze SAs as proper assertions, Milić leaves unexplained the impropriety of SAs. Let us focus on Stella's SA. One of the consequences of Milić's proposal is that we cannot assume that teachers ever believe in what they say in a classroom. It is easy to imagine that children, especially the young ones, would feel cheated, or at least misguided, after discovering that their teachers do not present them what they themselves believe. Milić's treatment cannot explain this fact since he argues that SAs are correct assertions, i.e., they satisfy KR. This is why I do not agree with Milić when he claims that «...it would not be pragmatically odd for any teacher to add that personally they prefer an alternative to [(1)]» (2017: 2287). Milić assumes that this is appropriate because, as he argues, Stella asserts (2). However, consider that saying something like “Modern day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*. But I personally think that this is wrong, and prefer a different theory.”, would be highly confusing for children. Additionally, following Milić's proposal, for any challenge of her claim, Stella could say something like “Well, I only meant according to the source X, *p*”. This would also be confusing for her pupils and Milić's view does not explain why.

4. Conclusions

My goal was to show that Milić's proposal to analyze SAs as proper, hedged assertions is unsatisfactory. First, Milić does not provide a clear criterion for distinguishing in which contexts speakers make flat-out assertions as opposed to hedged ones, that is, his notion of contextual parameters is underspecified. Second, he does not specify how to determine what type of hedging is appropriate to attribute to a speaker in a given context. Third, only when it is known by both parties that one says *p* but asserts something else (namely the hedged claim), we could agree with Milić that the speaker asserts a hedged proposition, but Milić does not make a case that SAs necessarily satisfy this requirement. Furthermore, his proposal does not capture all SAs. In the end, we are still left without a satisfactory account of SAs treated as proper assertions.

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